



**Directors of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions:
2. Reverend Joseph A. Stephan, 1884-1901**

Kevin Abing, 1994

Brouillet's successor, Father Joseph A. Stephan, was known as the "fighting" priest. Perhaps the sobriquet derived from Stephan's Civil War experience. More likely, however, the name reflected Stephan's personality. Whereas Brouillet favored negotiation and compromise, Stephan actively sought confrontation. As director, Stephan infused the BCIM with a "new and aggressive energy."¹ Stephan's combativeness often served him and the Bureau well, but all too often, his stubbornness and volatile temper hindered the cause he served so faithfully. As Charles Lusk wrote, Stephan's "zeal for the Indians was unbounded and his courage great." But, Lusk mused, sometimes Stephan's "zeal might have been tempered with greater discretion."²

Joseph A. Stephan was born on November 22, 1822, at Gissigheim, in the duchy of Baden. His father was of Greek descent, and his mother was probably Irish.³ As a youth, Stephan attended the village school in Gissigheim and later served an apprenticeship in the carpentry trade at Koenigsheim. Apparently, the life of a carpenter did not suit Stephan for he eventually joined the military, eventually becoming an officer under Prince Chlodwig K. Victor von Hohenlode. To further his military career, Stephan studied civil engineering at Karlsruhe Polytechnic Institute and philology at the University of Freiburg.⁴

While studying at Freiburg, disaster struck. From some unknown cause, Stephan was struck blind for two years. Similar to Saint Paul, Stephan turned to God during this trial. He reportedly pledged to become a priest if his eyesight returned. Stephan was true to his word. Upon his recovery, Stephan commenced studying scholastic philosophy at the University of Freiburg in 1845. It was here that he heard some distressing news. In 1847, Stec23, (.)TjETEMC /Span AMCID 18 BDC BT/TT0

phan: Indiana's Fighting Priest," *Social Justice Review* 69 (September 1976), 150. Prosen notes that one study of Stephan refutes the Irish descent of Stephan's mother.

⁴TIS (1902-1903), 2; Prosen, "Stephan," 150.

⁵TIS (1902-1903), 2-3; Prosen, "Stephan," 150.

Rather than return to Europe, Stephan decided to finish his theological studies in this new land. He was accepted into the seminary for the Cincinnati diocese under the guidance of Bishop John Baptist Purcell. Bishop Purcell ordained Stephan into the priesthood on March 19, 1850.⁶

Although settlement within the Cincinnati diocese proceeded rapidly, there were barely enough priests to minister to the Catholics in the area. Therefore, Stephan served several parishes scattered over a wide area. From 1851 to 1855, he was the first pastor to the Church of the Fourteen Holy Patrons in Reading, Ohio. In 1852, he guided the Mailton County, Ohio, parish and acted as assistant priest at Holy Trinity Church in Cincinnati. The following year, he assisted Father John Henry Luers at Saint Joseph Church in Cincinnati in addition to his duties as pastor at the Reading and Lockport, Ohio, parishes. Soon Father Stephan's duties extended even farther geographically. When the parishioners of Saint Boniface in Lafayette, Indiana, needed a German-speaking priest in 1854, Father Luers asked Stephan to fill the vacancy. In addition to his new parish, the 1856 *Catholic Directory* listed Father Stephan as assistant pastor at Saint Aloysius Church in Cumminsville, Ohio. He also served as chaplain at the Saint Aloysius Orphan Asylum for German-speaking boys and worked at orphanages across the Ohio River in Campbell County, Kentucky.⁷

After 1856, the center of Stephan's activities shifted to northern Indiana. Pope Pius IX incorporated that area into the newly created Fort Wayne diocese in 1857. Archbishop Purcell ordained Father Luers as the diocese's first bishop on January 10, 1858. Until recently, the Potawatomi Indians occupied this section of Indiana. But, as demands for Indian land grew, the federal government removed the Potawatomis to the Indian Territory by 1840. Subsequently, white settlers, primarily from Pennsylvania and German-speaking countries in Europe, poured into the vacated lands. Thus there was a great need for a priest who could speak German. Stephan eagerly

however, believed Stephan was rather odd because he occasionally wore blue suits or clothing thought inappropriate for a Catholic clergyman. Even worse, Stephan occasionally missed Sunday mass. He was an enthusiastic hunter, and several times he strayed too far to return in time to say mass!¹¹

The outbreak of the Civil War struck a patriotic chord within Stephan. Despite his extensive missionary field, he eagerly volunteered to serve in the Union army. On May 18, 1863, President Lincoln commissioned Stephan an army chaplain. He was among the commissioned officers of the Indiana Forty-seventh Regiment, attached to the Army of the Cumberland under the command of General George H. Thomas. Typically, Stephan embraced his new duties with a great deal of enthusiasm. George E. Cooper, an army surgeon stationed at Nashville, praised Stephan's efforts as post chaplain. Stephan, Cooper wrote, "took charge of all the Catholic troops in the city & vicinity, in Hospitals, in the encampments, at the Post & in the Quartermaster's Department." Cooper believed Stephan performed invaluable services and was a "zealous & exemplary man & has rendered universal satisfaction."¹²

Stephan's services extended beyond spiritual matters. During the war, he again had the opportunity to employ his engineering skills, helping construct a pontoon bridge. His superiors were so impressed with the bridge that they offered Stephan a promotion and permanent military assignment, but Stephan refused both offers. Instead, he returned to his missionary endeavors within the Fort Wayne Diocese in Indiana.¹³

During this time, Stephan became increasingly interested in the Church's efforts among Native Americans, especially among the Sioux Indians in the Dakota Territory. The Standing Rock Agency was one of the agencies assigned to the Catholic Church by government officials. Conditions at Standing Rock, however, were less than satisfactory to the government and to the BCIM. Both suspected the agent at Standing Rock, William T. Hughes of Chicago, of corruption. Thus the BCIM began searching for a possible replacement. Stephan was undoubtedly interested in the position. In 1877, he had a lawyer contact General Charles Ewing, a Civil War acquaintance, to express Stephan's interest. Ewing and Father Brouillet both believed Stephan a suitable candidate. When Commissioner of Indian Affairs Ezra Hayt finally removed Hughes as agent in the summer of 1878, the BCIM nominated Stephan for the position. The Indian Department eventually accepted Stephan, and he arrived at Standing Rock on October 16, 1878.¹⁴

Stephan was acutely aware of his twin responsibilities as Catholic priest and civilian Indian agent. Shortly after he assumed control at Standing Rock, he notified General Ewing that if he, as a Catholic priest, failed to carry out his duties in an impartial manner, "the whole of Protestantism from the great grandfather Martin Luther down to Susan B. Anthony would squeal like the hogs,

and good, with only few exceptions. Our mutual relations [were] of the most amicable and friendliest kind." Whites, however, were the "troublesome element and the constant harrassing, backbiting and lieing [sic] from those men, makes me disgusted with the place." In frustration, Stephan pleaded with Ewing: "I hope you will do me the favor to help me to get out of it." Several weeks later, Stephan wrote Brouillet that he would be "really glad when I am relieved from here." The commanding officer "meddles constantly with the agency affairs and thus trys [sic] to exercise a guardianship over the Indian Agent sitting the Indians in confusion and detain them from working. As long as he is here there is no use for an agent."²⁴

Stephan finally left the agency at the end of 1881, but his work among Native Americans was far from over. For a time, he ministered to white settlers in the Dakota Territory. From 1882 to 1883, Stephan served at Fargo, and, in 1884, he was at Jamestown. Bishop Martin Marty also named Stephan his vicar general and consultor during this time.²⁵ Stephan returned to Indian mission work in 1884. That year, Father Brouillet, BCIM director, died. Archbishop James Gibbons of Baltimore, upon the recommendation of Bishops Marty and O'Connor, named Father Stephan as director on May 14, 1884. The Church's Third Plenary Council confirmed Stephan's position on December 20.²⁶ For the next seventeen years, Stephan worked tirelessly to advance the cause of Catholic Indian missions.

Thanks in large part to Father Brouillet, the Bureau itself operated under more advantageous circumstances. The Plenary Council of 1884 regularized the Bureau's structure. Council members recognized the BCIM as an official institution within the Church. An episcopal committee of five would direct the Bureau's activities and name its officers. Moreover, the council dealt with the chronic problem of financing the Bureau's activities. An annual collection would be taken up on the first Sunday of Lent in every diocese within the United States. The proceeds would be used to finance the BCIM's operations

No longer limited to specific agencies, Stephan and the Catholic Bureau eagerly applied for government contracts. Although the various Protestant denominations had, for the most part, diminished their work among the Indians, Stepha

two. Stephan charged Morgan with religious bigotry because he had summarily dismissed Catholic employees in the Indian Department. Furthermore, Stephan dredged up an old court-martial from Morgan's Civil War days. (No action was taken against Morgan, and he was even later promoted.) Protestant organizations vigorously defended Morgan against the Bureau's charges. His efforts to defeat Morgan consumed Stephan, but it was not enough. The Senate confirmed Morgan on February 12, 1890, and Dorchester the next day.³²

Morgan's confirmation did not end the controversy. As expected, relations between the new Commissioner and the BCIM deteriorated. Stephan was determined to save Catholic schools and tried to bypass Morgan by securing appropriations from Congress. "If we could not extend our work," Stephan mused, "we hoped to maintain its status quo." Although he gained funding for three Indian schools, Stephan encountered much congressional opposition to the appropriations. Naturally, Stephan suspected that Morgan was

